

December 5, 2018

US DISTRICT JUDGE WILLIAM M CONLEY
US DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF WISCONSIN
120 N HENRY ST SUITE 320
MADISON WI 53703

Dear Judge Conley,

The intent of this letter is to share a bit of my son's life, *Matthew Raymond Howard*, who is scheduled to appear before you for sentencing on December 18, 2018.

Matt was the light of my husband's world, tagging after him running errands, fishing, or simply dragging out half a garage worth of toys to the driveway so Matthew could play. Matt's favorite was his "Freddy Flintstone" car and an old time, spring-horse, named Thunder. I smile at the times people would stop and ask whether we were having a garage sale, such were the toys all lined up for Matt and our grandson, Austin. (Ironically, toys that were purchased from someone else's garage sale!)

Parenting in our early 40's allowed us to treasure more time with Matt versus time invested in building a career; it was wonderful to have this second opportunity at parenting. Matt was our "million dollar baby" dubbed by a Specialist who knew there was an improbability of this happening. He said, "You've won the million dollar lottery!"; we felt we had won something so much greater.

Sadly, my son has had to overcome many trials and tribulations in his short life: difficulties in utero; a birth by emergency induced labor; an accidental emergency room overdose at 17 months; discovering his father deceased when Matt was four years old; watching his Nanny fight breast cancer, only to lose the battle the second time around; his own cancer battle with Hodgkin's Lymphoma; and a myriad of physical/mental disabilities — all prior to graduating high school.

Matt has been under an individualized education plan (IEP) with the Madison Metropolitan School District from three years old through his high school graduation at 21 years of age. He has seen specialists and a hosts of doctors, psychologists, and psychiatrists throughout his growing years. Where most children spent their time playing baseball, basketball, or football, Matt's extracurricular time was always spent in a doctor's office, Sylvan Learning Center, the Waisman Center, summer school, night school, UW Carbone Cancer Center, Dean Cancer Center, or at the kitchen counter with Mom doing homework. He has experienced so many more trials, at such a young age, than his peers.

The remarkable trait about Matt is I've never heard him complain about what life has dealt him. He prodded along making his family happy. He was happy. In his younger years, he always had a HotWheel tucked inside his fist; when asked his name, he was Texas Walker Ranger. In recent years, he has been a car enthusiast and worked out approximately three times per week with the Marines or Army recruiting office.

One of Matthew's disability, Dyspraxia, is a neurological disorder with language problems, difficulties with thought and perception, and making it hard for Matthew to get started or moving toward a goal. His working out with the Marines and Army was the first time I have ever seen him deeply committed to a goal, motivated, getting up early, carrying through with each workout, meeting up with the workouts, joining a gym to help with endurance, studying books to help him pass the armed forces tests. He excelled; I was so proud of him! The day he was arrested, he had been working out with the recruiters and was to have signed up for service that very afternoon.

Matt has always loved his family. His Nanny was a widow and aged 68 when he was born. His birth gave her a purpose to live while he gained so much love, support, and guidance in return. Nanny's second round of cancer included chemotherapy treatments. As a teenager, Matt would always choose to visit with her after school, arriving at the UW Carbone Cancer Center to sit with her during chemo. A young teenager, choosing his grandmother's company rather than going straight home. He even pulled all A's one semester during this time. He helped immensely with chores and errands that needed done, whether in her household or out and about.

After my husband's death, Matt was the one who kept me going. As I aged and began to experience medical pain issues, he has been a Godsend in helping with chores and errands. On many occasions, he has helped family and church family move and was tremendously helpful.

He has always loved getting the family together. There have been many pool parties at his Aunt's when we were all younger. He'd also spend one day a week with her, going on their quest for adventure while he was young. He entered a Mother's Day essay contest to the Wisconsin State Journal where they placed second, and an article and pictures were placed in the Sunday paper. As he got older, he loved family grill-outs, going to the movies, and a day trip out-of-town. He was the core of pulling everyone together, to laugh, play board games, smile, and listen to his latest news on cars or music.

Psychologist Dr. Sandra Eisemann mentioned once that Matt would always experience problems with boys because boys could always sense when another boy was just a tad different and then shun that boy. Whereas, girls were more nurturing and would likely befriend someone different than shun them. Dr. Eisemann wasn't far off, the one thing all of us couldn't do was stop Matt from being bullied. He spent many years of loneliness in not having friends his own age. It was heartbreaking to watch, but even more heartbreaking to watch him form friendships among other boys with problems, who unfortunately lacked good, moral decision-making skills.

Matthew grew up in a Christian household, attending Bible class and worship service every Sunday. Although my kids tease me now, the Teletubbies, Power Rangers, and Cartoon Network were banned from watching. Matt has a love of music, and any purchased CD music had to be purchased from Walmart to ensure censorship. In his early years, we spent many a time reading books on proper emotions and reactions, stories in the Bible, as well as books with moral choices.

The summer after Nanny passed, Matt's only Uncle and Aunt in Madison moved to Arizona while a dear friend and her husband moved to Florida. Our support system wasn't there anymore. Matt was later dealing with his own cancer diagnosis. He changed, who we were as a family, changed. Everything I considered a storm previously, was now only the calm before the storm. I saw Matt become depressed; I couldn't help. I saw him ache at what humanity really was; I couldn't help. I saw Matt become a hoarder; I couldn't keep up with the debris. Our lives were falling apart but I couldn't understand why. I tried but I couldn't understand what was going wrong.

In hindsight, I see a boy who throughout his life was taught to advocate for himself. It is my belief (I haven't asked him) the only way he knew how to advocate for himself was perhaps to place himself in a position where he had strict boundaries and less freedom, the military. Serving our country was very important to him but perhaps deep down it was also to keep him from the unwanted activities he was involved in. Where else could he seek advocacy? Nowhere.

I do know he is remorseful. He has wanted to reach out to his sister but I've asked him to wait until after sentencing. If he reached out to her before, I know she wouldn't be able to decipher whether or not the purpose was self motivated. He has agreed not to upset the situation further and wait for better timing. This, in itself, is a difficult thing for Matt - to wait. I've heard the remorse in his voice, in the ongoing apologies throughout this past year. He has expressed gratitude, continually voicing his appreciation and thankfulness for my reaching out to him.

He misses his sister deeply. She felt like a mother to him because of their age difference. He saw her as a fun-loving older sister. Not a day went past since they moved back from Florida did he fail to call her on the phone. His absence in her life, she has relayed to me, was like he had passed away. No goodbyes, nothing ... one day he was here and the next he was gone. She has gone through much turmoil.

This past year I have also seen him mature to levels I wasn't sure he'd reach during my lifetime. He confided in me, he never paid much attention to the specialists because he didn't think he had disabilities; after being sequestered, he now realizes he does. That, in itself, is a tremendous step forward because now he is receptive to help. We have shared discussions and writings about books of moral character, reminding me again of this past time we shared when he was younger. One of the first books after his arrest was The Diving Bell and the Butterfly, a memoir by

journalist Jean-Dominique, who suffered from locked-in syndrome. His beautiful mind took him to places his physical body could not. Matt could learn to cope where he was by using his own mind, and we compared the similarities and differences. Over the past year, we've read seven other books together; Matt has read even more. We plan on continuing down this course.

I understand what Matt was involved in was wrong and punishment is part of the consequence. Why or what caused him to end up in his current situation, I will probably never know or understand. I truly believed he tried advocating by himself but fell short. My faith has given me comfort that God has a plan in all of this. My hope is, Your Honor, you will see Matthew's better side and provide a means in which he is allowed to turn himself around.

A lengthy prison sentence appears to me detrimental in making him a viable member of society: the people he is around, seeing them go in and out of the system. He has already experienced this too much in the Dane County Jail. Although I do not believe he would re-offend, it is still concerning there is such a revolving door among people in jail and prison. I'm concerned he won't receive the help which a treatment center could provide. I'm afraid he won't be able to continue his education, especially when most schools and jobs require the use of modern technology. I'm even concerned about other little things that somehow appear so much larger in a Mother's heart.

I am seeking the mercy of the Court when you decide what punishment my son should have for his behavior and pray that Matt moves forward in his goals for a promising future. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Michelle Howard
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